

Catholics hope to gain from greater demand for religious items, info

SOMERSET, N.J. – The time is ripe for Catholics to overtake Protestants in terms of book sales and outreach, especially through the Internet and electronic media, according to the director of the Catholic Marketing Network.

“We have a great opportunity to creatively reach out to Catholics,” said Alan Napleton, president of the network, which recently held its 13th annual convention at the Garden State Events Center in Somerset.

The number of individuals with independent Catholic and Christian book stores is dropping nationwide, he said. At the same time, there is an increasing demand for religious items and information.

“There’s always some type of religious book on The New York Times best-seller list,” he noted. The question is how will the demand for spiritual books and religious goods be met?

“I’m very optimistic,” Mr. Napleton said. “We, as Catholics, have been behind the curve for 30 years, but we have a great chance to catch up” and perhaps leapfrog ahead.

He is particularly encouraged by authors who have landed book contracts with major publishers, such as EWTN’s Raymond Arroyo for the biography “Mother Angelica: The Remarkable Story of a Nun, Her Nerve, and a Network of Miracles,” published by Doubleday, and Joseph Pearce, whose recent book on Shakespeare was published by Ignatius Press. The latter will gain secular attention due to the topic, he predicted.

The marketing convention brings together wholesalers and buyers of Catholic religious goods from books and prayer cards to statues, jewelry and artwork, drawing about 175 vendors to showcase their wares and 300 retailers.

This year’s convention also drew many young people, “and that bodes well,” he said.

He was approached by a recent graduate of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, who wants to serve the church with a business on Catholic books and items, but plans to do it all on the Internet.

He said even many of the wholesalers are developing direct-to-consumer strategies, rather than just relying on sales to retail outlets. "If a bookstore is debating whether or not to have an online presence, they may be too late. Online is the future," he said.

Many small Catholic bookstores now survive by selling not just books, but also gifts and by adding amenities like coffee and baked goods. He said the trend in bookstores is to add higher-end gifts like statues and paintings.

"The publishing world is rapidly changing," Mr. Napleton said, "and electronic media will change books and music; we just don't exactly know how."

One thing that is changing is how authors reach out and the Catholic Writers' Guild was on hand to showcase its authors and reach out to publishers, agencies and bookstores.

"It's not just content that counts, although Catholic literature and nonfiction books are becoming more popular," said Meredith Gould of New Jersey, who has written several nonfiction books. "It is the production values of the book (such as cover art and binding) and marketing."

Karina Fabian of Minot, N.D., is president of the guild. She said, as an author of Catholic science fiction, she primarily reaches out to readers through the Internet. "But the Internet is a great big pond. We're making a tiny splash, and hoping the ripples expand."

The publicist responsible for marketing Ignatius Press, Christine Valentine-Owsik, said marketing Catholic authors in a secular world is an uphill battle because "the secular world is anti-Catholic. Not only do you have to get the media to recognize your product, (but) the Catholic message really hits them between the eyes."

She pitches stories to the secular media in creative ways, for example, emphasizing the historical significance of Mr. Pearce's book that shows that Shakespeare was a

Catholic.

“The secular media gets to know us when they need us, during the papal transition, or when Pope Benedict (XVI) visited, and I maintain those relationships,” she said. “First you have to educate the reporter, and then you can give them the story.”